

RESEARCH

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Compensatory
Education:
Does It Work?

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SUMMARY

Billions of dollars have been spent in the United States on compensatory education programs. While some educators argue that there are children in Manitoba who would benefit from compensatory education, many will argue that directly copying American programs may not be appropriate. How can we learn from the American experience with compensatory education? By carefully examining both the process and the results.

A wide-spread diversity in the aims and methods of compensatory programs has resulted in an even greater array of reported results. Program goals have ranged from the very broad, such as 'breaking the poverty cycle', to the very specific, such as a measurable improvement in certain skill areas. Generally, programs have attempted to reduce class size, as well as provide remedial programs, special personnel and enrichment experiences. Many programs have stressed that some children need more than simply equal access to educational resources. That is, if additional resources are necessary for a student's development, then that student would be at an educational disadvantage without them, and compensatory education should provide those resources.

Who are the educationally disadvantaged? Low achievers in school and students whose educational opportunities are restricted in some way have been the focus of compensatory programs. Students who are poor, part of racial and ethnic minorities and non-English speaking are most likely to be disadvantaged.

Compensatory strategies have either focused upon the student, or have attempted to change the school or classroom experience. Delivery systems aimed at the student have included: early childhood education; reading, language and basic skills development; family life intervention and infant education; tutoring programs; and, guidance and counselling programs, including dropout prevention programs. Situational changes have included: curriculum revision and instructional materials; personnel training and auxiliary school personnel; and, organizational changes in the school.

The major difficulty in assessing the overall effectiveness of compensatory education is that there were no generally accepted goals. While it is clear that the aim was to offset negative effects upon learning, the question of what measurable objective this translates into remains. Fortunately, some general conclusions can be drawn. During the first decade of compensatory education funding, (1965 to 1975), when financial aid was plentiful, the emphasis upon raising cognitive levels did not appear to be realized.

Since 1975, the achievement gains outlook has been more positive; overall, compensatory programs yield a small but positive effect. Results range from about one to one and a half months grade equivalent gain for each month in the program. Although they are small, these gains can be very important on an individual basis. Gains appear to be more significant in the early years, namely the primary grades and particularly pre-school. However, there is no clear evidence that achievement gains are sustained after the compensatory programs end.

A closer examination of what aspects of compensatory programs are successful yielded the following. Programs emphasizing basic skills seem to be more successful than those emphasizing cognitive concepts or affective skills. In addition, almost all program evaluations indicated that strong parental involvement has a significant positive impact on students' achievement outcomes.

The following general conclusions can also be drawn. Avoiding very large classes, especially for primary grade children and those of lower ability levels has positive impact upon achievement. Teacher experience, especially in compensatory education settings, appears to weigh more heavily than formal academic qualifications. Positive teacher attitudes are especially important. Structured teaching, combined with a directed teaching technique, appears positively associated with positive classroom experience and student achievement. Instructional materials are beneficial when they supplement direct teaching, but not when they supplant it.

Compensatory education can make a difference for some students. From the American experience, however, it is clear that programs must not only be carefully designed to achieve measurable objectives, but the methods must be matched to students' needs, and to teacher competencies. Follow-up evaluations, to determine whether program objectives are being met, are essential.

RÉSUMÉ

Les États-Unis ont investi des milliards de dollars dans l'éducation compensatoire. Un bon nombre d'éducateurs manitobains affirment que certains enfants de la province pourraient bénéficier de ce genre d'éducation; par contre, beaucoup disent que transposer les programmes américains dans notre milieu canadien ne serait certes pas la meilleure façon de procéder. En quoi l'expérience américaine dans ce domaine peut-elle nous être utile?

Examinons attentivement le fonctionnement des programmes et les résultats obtenus. L'éventail des résultats est d'autant plus vaste qu'il existe une foule de buts visés et de méthodes employées. Ces buts vont du très général comme "briser le cycle de pauvreté", au très particulier comme en arriver à une amélioration tangible dans certains domaines d'acquisition. Dans l'ensemble, les programmes visent à diminuer l'effectif de la classe, à offrir des classes de rattrapage et à donner aux élèves une expérience personnelle unique et enrichissante. Beaucoup renforcent également l'idée que bénéficier des mêmes avantages scolaires que les autres ne suffit pas à certains enfants, et que si un élève est désavantagé parce qu'il a besoin d'autres moyens d'épanouissement, l'éducation compensatoire devrait lui fournir ces moyens.

Qu'entend-on par élèves désavantagés? L'éducation compensatoire s'adresse surtout aux élèves dont les résultats sont pauvres ou qui ne peuvent bénéficier, pour diverses raisons, de tous les avantages scolaires offerts. Ceux qui viennent de familles pauvres, appartiennent à une minorité raciale ou ethnique, ou ne parlent pas anglais, risquent fort d'être désavantagés.

Les divers moyens utilisés concentrent sur l'élève lui-même ou essaient de modifier l'attitude au sein de l'école ou de la salle de classe. Parmi les moyens qui visent l'individu, citons l'éducation de la petite enfance, l'acquisition de l'aptitude à l'apprentissage de base : langage, lecture; la coopération avec le milieu familial et l'éducation des tout-petits. Il existe également des programmes d'aide individuelle, d'orientation et de consultation parmi lesquels certains encouragent les élèves à ne pas abandonner leurs études. Ceci a évidemment entraîné une révision des programmes et du matériel didactique, une formation adéquate du personnel et le recrutement d'assistants, ainsi que des changements au niveau de l'organisation de l'école.

Étant donné qu'on n'a pas au départ convenu des buts visés, il est difficile d'évaluer l'efficacité de l'éducation compensatoire dans son ensemble. On veut évidemment débarrasser l'éducation de tout effet négatif, et la question de savoir quel objectif tangible choisir pour y parvenir reste encore à trancher. On peut toutefois tirer des conclusions générales. Au cours de la première décennie (de 1965 à 1975), lorsque l'aide financière accordée à l'éducation compensatoire était généreuse, il semble que l'on n'ait pas suffisamment insisté sur le développement intellectuel. Depuis 1975, par contre, les taux de réussite semblent dans l'ensemble plus satisfaisants et les effets de l'éducation compensatoire sont encore moindres mais évidents. Les élèves gagnent d'un demi mois de classe régulière pour chaque mois passé dans le programme à un mois entier. Ces proportions peuvent paraître négligeables mais elles sont très importantes lorsque l'on considère chaque

élève. On retrouve, semble-t-il, les taux de réussite les plus élevés parmi les élèves les plus jeunes, au primaire et surtout au niveau préscolaire. Rien n'indique toutefois que les taux de réussite se maintiennent une fois que le programme compensatoire est terminé.

À la lumière des succès de l'éducation compensatoire, on peut dire que les programmes d'acquisition de l'aptitude à l'apprentissage de base marchent mieux que les programmes de développement intellectuel ou affectif. La plupart des évaluations indiquent en outre que la coopération des parents entraîne de meilleurs résultats chez les élèves.

On peut également tirer les conclusions suivantes : il est incontestable que diminuer l'effectif des classes augmente les chances de succès, surtout au primaire ou dans le cas d'élèves moins doués. L'expérience du professeur, surtout dans ce cadre bien particulier, semble compter davantage que les qualifications comme telles. Il est important que le professeur ait une attitude favorable. Un enseignement structuré et une méthode d'enseignement dirigée sont synonymes de succès, et pour l'élève et pour l'ensemble de la classe. Le matériel didactique n'est profitable que s'il est perçu comme un outil de soutien et non comme un substitut à l'enseignement direct.

Il est vrai que l'éducation compensatoire peut transformer la vie d'un bon nombre d'élèves. L'expérience américaine nous enseigne cependant qu'il faut élaborer les programmes avec soin afin qu'ils atteignent des objectifs tangibles, et que les méthodes utilisées doivent être parfaitement adaptées à l'expérience du professeur et aux besoins des élèves. Il est également essentiel qu'une évaluation se fasse afin de déterminer si les objectifs visés ont été atteints.

WHAT IS COMPENSATORY EDUCATION?

Compensatory education arose as a way of overcoming perceived disadvantages of some groups in obtaining education. In Canada, "equality of educational opportunity" has usually referred to post-secondary education, or to the specialized needs of handicapped children. But in the United States, a much broader approach was taken. There, educational differences related to socio-economic status were identified. A massive federal funding program launched in the mid-1960's was part of an overall "War on Poverty." While several European countries have also implemented compensatory education programs, the American experience provides the most information on both compensatory programs and results.

Billions of dollars have been provided under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for supplementing and improving the education of poor and minority-group children in the United States. These expenditures have been used for programs that range from pre-school to post-secondary education. The aims of these programs were varied. They ranged from the broad goal of breaking the poverty cycle to the very specific, such as measurable improvement in certain skill areas. The means and methods utilized by compensatory programs also varied. Generally, their emphasis has been upon reducing class size, as well as providing remedial programs, special personnel and enrichment experiences.

Many of these compensatory programs have emphasized that some children need more than simply equal access to educational resources. Instead, it has been argued that if, additional resources are necessary for a student's development, then that student would be at an educational disadvantage without them. In general terms, compensatory education programs attempt to provide those resources.

WHO ARE THE EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED?

"Disadvantaged" has been used to designate individuals and groups who are low achievers in school, and whose educational opportunities are restricted in some ways. Students who are poor, part of racial and ethnic minorities, and non-English speaking are most likely to be disadvantaged, but this is not true in every individual case. While handicapped or special needs students could be described as educationally disadvantaged, they are beyond the scope of this discussion.

WHAT ARE THE DELIVERY MECHANISMS?

Various strategies have been suggested for improving the educational performance of disadvantaged children. These include changing the student and his family, changing the school, increasing and changing the distribution of resources, and changing control of the schools (eg. providing for greater community control and involvement). Descriptions of the strategy categories relevant to the Manitoba educational system are listed below.

The first group of delivery systems focuses upon the student as the locus of change.

Early Childhood Education. The most well-known programs include Head Start, which attempts to help disadvantaged children achieve "readiness" for first grade, and Follow Through. The latter attempts to sustain this "readiness" as well as to supplement these gains.

Reading, Language and Basic Skills Development.

The most common type of program utilizes various materials, equipment and personnel to increase achievement.

Family Life Intervention and Infant Education.

Family interactions are significant influences upon the child's cognitive and school development. Programs of parental involvement and infant education range from helping the mother become a teacher of her child, to improving family stability.

Tutoring Programs. Both volunteer and paid student tutors, as well as community people and aides, have become involved in individual and small-group tutoring.

Guidance and Counselling Programs, and Dropout Prevention Programs. Social, psychological and vocational services are provided. Social workers and community aides attempt to bridge the gap between school and home. Dropout prevention programs include work-study, on-the-job training and financial incentives.

The next three methods attempt to change the school or classroom experience.

Curriculum Revision and Instructional Materials.

Changes include recognition of the students' environment and greater involvement of the student and the community. Ethnic studies and new materials can shift from middle-class suburbia to disadvantaged and minority children.

Personnel Training and Auxiliary School Personnel.

Preservice and inservice training for both beginning and experienced educators can provide insights into teaching the disadvantaged. Recruitment and training of local teacher aides, paraprofessionals and volunteers augment both community participation and employment.

School Organization. Organizational changes can include changes in the length of school days and years, open classrooms and flexible schedules.

While some or all of the above may be feasible within Manitoba, the more important question to be addressed is whether an investment in these compensatory programs is a sound one.

DOES IT WORK?

There are several things to be learned from the American experience with compensatory education. While ESEA was the first major piece of social legislation to mandate project reporting, the multitude of evaluations and analyses are contradictory and ambiguous. The major difficulty in assessing the overall effectiveness of compensatory education is that there seem to be no generally accepted goals. While it is clear that the aim has been to offset negative effects upon learning, the question of what measurable objective this translates into remains.

Fortunately, some general conclusions can be drawn. They must be recognized within their relevant contexts however. During the first decade, 1965 to 1975, when financial aid was plentiful, the emphasis upon raising the cognitive levels of targetted students did not appear to be realized. Numerous studies reported that achievement gains were either not maintained over time, or were not substantially different from students not receiving compensatory assistance. Yet, some argue that other outcomes were achieved, namely, expanded services to large numbers of children, financial support to ailing school districts and opportunities for exposure to a wider range of experiences.

The achievement gains outlook has been more positive since 1975. Concurrently, there has been a general trend towards increased accountability. In many instances, it is likely that administrators of programs learned from their experiences and made appropriate changes to their organization and operations. In other instances, some of the less successful programs have been "weeded out." In addition, project reporting has

become more stringent. Overall, compensatory programs yield a small but positive effect on the achievement growth of disadvantaged students. Achievement gains range from about one to one and a half months grade equivalent for each month in the program. It should be noted that this is not an additional gain, but rather, the overall achievement increase. Although the gains are small, they can be very important on an individual basis. Gains appear to be more significant in early years, namely, the primary grades and particularly pre-school. However, there is no clear evidence that achievement gains are sustained.

WHAT ASPECTS ARE SUCCESSFUL?

Pre-school education programs, (eg. Head Start), made positive IQ gains and maintained these gains. Children in these programs were less likely to be placed in special education classes, less likely to be failed, and somewhat less likely to drop out of school. Findings imply that effective pre-school programs can reduce the need for more costly programs in higher grades. Head Start is also the largest source of medical and dental services provided to poor pre-school children. Evaluation of Follow Through found that programs emphasizing basic skills were more successful than those emphasizing cognitive concepts or affective skills. Almost all program evaluations indicated that strong parental involvement has a significant positive impact on students' achievement outcomes.

Evaluation of specific classroom strategies and programs, classroom size, instructional time, instructional methods (including materials and teaching style), have yielded the following generalized conclusions. Avoiding very large classes, especially for primary grade children and those of lower ability levels has positive impact upon achievement. Teacher experience, especially in compensatory education settings, appears to weigh more heavily than formal academic qualifications. Positive teacher attitudes are especially relevant. Structured teaching, combined with a directed teaching technique, appears positively associated with successful classroom experience and student achievement. Instructional materials are beneficial when they supplement direct teaching, but not when they supplant it.

WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS?

While it would be overly optimistic to predict that large expenditures for compensatory education will

overcome the social and economic inequalities faced by disadvantaged students, an understanding of how to improve their academic performance exists. Whether this knowledge will be put into practice is the key question.

Is there a need for compensatory education programs in Manitoba? With the current economic turndown, a closer examination of public services is prevalent. Yet, another result of the deteriorating economic conditions may be a greater number of "at risk" children within, or about to enter, the educational system. It has been proposed that financial difficulties in the home often translate into social problems affecting children's academic achievement; unfortunately this is usually a "hidden" social problem. More overt are the increasing numbers of single-parent families; these families often face both economic and social difficulties. The growing numbers of non-English speaking minorities and urban natives also encounter barriers to achievement in the educational system. Thus, there are students in Manitoba who might be targetted for compensatory education.

The cost-effectiveness of an investment in compensatory education must also be examined. The evidence reveals that there is no clear relationship between the dollars spent and program effectiveness. In other words, it is not necessarily true that more dollars lead to greater program effectiveness. The general approach to funding followed by the Americans was as follows. Funds were allocated to the states and then to school districts in terms of poverty criteria. Then, schools within a district were allocated funds in terms of a mix of low income and low standardized achievement performance. Thus, educationally disadvantaged students who attended schools which did not receive funding did not become participants in compensatory programs. Funding distributed this way did not always reach the target.

The policy implications are clear. Dollars allocated to compensatory education should be program-specific, and an evaluation system, measuring both achievement and cost-effectiveness, should be tied to program delivery. More generally, the following principles should be considered. Since participation in compensatory education seems to be advantageous, by distributing funds to include greater numbers of low-achievers rather than funding a small number of more expensive programs, more achievement gains may be realized. While it may seem to be tautological, it should be emphasized that only effective practices

should be funded, although a range of programs should exist. No one program will be effective in all circumstances; only programs developed for specific categories of students are likely to be effective.

Compensatory education funding can be translated into achievement gains with careful monitoring. Program goals objectives should be clearly stated, measurable and achievable. The methods utilized should be tied to the program goals. Finally, evaluation design should be co-ordinated with the program delivery system during its implementation.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

An examination of both the delivery mechanism used in compensatory programs and the research results indicates that there are methods of providing compensatory education that are financially feasible. Within the current resources of the Department of Education, the following suggestions may be viable. Inservice training in both awareness of, and effective teaching methods for, disadvantaged students could be developed and promoted. An off-shoot of increased attention to compensatory education could be the stimulation of preservice training. The development and distribution of new instructional materials and resources, including guidance programs, could facilitate the introduction of programs. Some types of computer-assisted instruction may prove to be useful in compensatory programs; teacher training and resource development could be one avenue for the Department to follow. In addition, the Department could also provide information and specialist assistance to school divisions for the development and evaluation of compensatory programs.

Working in conjunction with other agencies may provide opportunities for compensatory programs. Encouraging preservice training in schools with disadvantaged children is one possibility. Federal government employment development programs could be investigated for the hiring and training of local people as aides or paraprofessionals in the classroom. Perhaps some cost-sharing agreements could be reached with school divisions, or other government departments. Some form of incentive system might be developed for experienced educators to encourage them to teach in schools with disadvantaged students. Co-operative ventures could be proposed to other departments concerned with social problems, such as Health or Community Services, to provide educational/health services to pre-school children and their families.

CONCLUSION

The American experience with compensatory education, after careful examination, reveals that compensatory programs can lead to achievement gains by educationally disadvantaged students. Since there appear to be Manitobans who might be targetted for such programs, as well as knowledge regarding the effectiveness of various strategies, carefully conceived programs could be successful. Parental involvement should be included wherever possible, as this was one factor that was identified as leading to success in many programs. More generally, a recent summary submitted to the U.S. National Institute of Education outlined the other necessary conditions for success:

"It is essential to match methods to the diagnosed needs of the students, to population characteristics and to teacher competencies. In addition, it is essential to define the purposes and goals of compensatory education and to fit the strategies to the goals."

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